

Durbin Cautions Seniors About Medicare Cards

by Mike Ramsey - Copley News Service

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U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin cautioned seniors Monday against rushing to buy one of the dozens of new discount drug cards available to Medicare recipients.

"Frankly, as soon as you sign up and pay your fee, you're stuck for a year," the Springfield Democrat said during a news conference at a Chicago pharmacy with two other members of the Illinois congressional delegation. "What may look like an appealing discount for a drug right now might, in fact, disappear in the next week."

A variety of private discount cards went on the market this week as part of a Republican-backed program to offer Medicare drug insurance beginning in 2006. Durbin said the earlier rollout of discount cards won't do much to control rising drug costs and is likely to confuse seniors.

"They're being swamped with information right now from private companies that offer these cards," U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Chicago, said. "That information describes the size of the discount and the drugs that are being covered. But is this really what we want for our seniors - a mailbox stuffed with glossy brochures from drug companies?"

Also joining Durbin was Chicago Congressman Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat who advocates the re-importation of cheaper drugs from Canada, and Bea Lumpkin of the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans. All agreed that Illinoisans may be better off using a new state program that offers drug discounts to people 65 and older and the disabled.

Eligible participants can be in both the "Illinois Rx Buying Club" and a Medicare-approved discount drug plan.

As of April 25, there were 64,500 people enrolled in the Illinois plan, a spokeswoman for Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich said. Participants pay \$25 a year and save an average 21 percent on their prescriptions through state-negotiated savings.

Under legislation Durbin and **Schakowsky** are sponsoring, Medicare would negotiate drug

prices for its recipients.

Durbin's news conference contrasted in tone with an event sponsored earlier in the day by U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Yorkville. Hastert, accompanied by officials from President Bush's administration, advised seniors about shopping around for a card that suits them and their needs.

Schakowsky said seniors with private drug insurance should not consider the Medicare-approved discount cards a substitute.

"This is not an insurance plan. If you have prescription drug coverage, you better keep it," she said.